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National Intelligence Estimate

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The Changing Sino-Soviet Relationship

Key Judgments

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**THE CHANGING
SINO-SOVIET RELATIONSHIP**

KEY JUDGMENTS

The full text of this Estimate is
being published separately with regular distribution.

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THIS ESTIMATE IS ISSUED BY THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL
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THE NATIONAL FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE BOARD CONCURS.

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Also Participating:

The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army

The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy

The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force

The Director of Intelligence, Headquarters, Marine Corps

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SCOPE NOTE

For almost two years the USSR and China have been actively probing the possibilities of improving their relations with one another—at the very time that the Soviets have continued to develop and modernize their already formidable strategic and conventional military forces adjacent to China. These negotiating probes are not wholly new; they have occurred before. But this time there has been some forward movement, at least on secondary issues and political atmospherics. This raises several questions for us:

- In what manner is the relationship between these two powers in process of change?
- How do Soviet consultations with China fit into the USSR's broad strategic-military objectives in East Asia?
- How far are present Sino-Soviet consultations going to carry Moscow and Beijing?
- In addition to probable trends, what alternative outcomes are possible and what would be their likelihood?
- And what will be the significance of the Sino-Soviet future for US interests?

This Estimate addresses these questions, examining both the constraints on and incentives for improvement in the Sino-Soviet relationship. The Estimate also explores the possible effect of certain variables, and proposes indicators by which to measure changes in the relationship. Except where otherwise indicated, the period of the Estimate is the next two to three years.

Because of the complexity of issues discussed in this Estimate, it is being published in two versions: for broad readership, the complete text; for senior readers, the Key Judgments.

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KEY JUDGMENTS

The present consultations between the USSR and China are unlikely to produce major concessions on the part of either, and the many issues that divide them will largely continue. A change in their relationship is nonetheless taking place. We believe this process will continue during the period—the next two to three years—covered by this Estimate.

As a result largely of Soviet initiative and of an increased Chinese responsiveness, Moscow and Beijing have reached numerous agreements over the past year or so on relatively minor economic and cultural questions. But the change taking place in their relationship does not so much involve their basic positions or any “moving closer” to one another, as it does a moderating of the intensity of conflict. These two powers will almost certainly remain suspicious, wary antagonists, continuing to arm against each other and to criticize each other’s aims and conduct—but within a less hostile climate.

Many issues will continue to divide China and the USSR—and will continue to prevent either from making major concessions to the other. The principal such forces:

- *On both sides*, historical enmity, suspicions, ideological pretensions, and racist attitudes toward each other.
- The sensitivity of the Sino-Soviet issue in the inner politics of both Beijing and Moscow—with the consequent need for their leaders not to become vulnerable to charges of betraying vital national interests to the other power.
- Chinese concerns about Soviet power over the coming decades; Soviet concerns about potential Chinese power over the coming century.
- *On the part of China*, Beijing’s continuing belief that the USSR retains expansionist ambitions, and that Moscow’s long-term desire to expand Soviet presence and influence around China’s periphery is aimed directly at isolating China and diminishing its influence in Asia.
- The desire of China that the USSR make concessions on three major issues: that is, that the USSR significantly reduce its

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military power (nuclear and nonnuclear) in the eastern USSR and Mongolia, cease its support for Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea, and withdraw its combat troops from Afghanistan.

- In the absence of any major Soviet concessions on these questions, Chinese reluctance to come to terms with Moscow on the Sino-Soviet border dispute.
- Beijing's bitter experience with the high costs of close association with Moscow: remembrance of unacceptable past Soviet efforts to subvert the politics and armed forces of China and to subordinate China's national interests to those of the Soviet Union.
- The fact that China's boss, Deng Xiaoping, was himself one of the foremost anti-Soviet officials indentified with the split of these two Communist powers, a generation ago, into rival Third Romes.
- *On the part of the USSR*, a bedrock, absolute refusal on the part of Soviet leaders to halt Moscow's continuing buildup of military power adjacent to China, or to give up or markedly lessen the great military superiority the USSR enjoys over China.
- Moscow's reluctance to yield the geopolitical advantages it currently derives from its ties with Vietnam, especially the forward deployment of ships and aircraft, and the barrier these developments constitute to Chinese influence in Southeast Asia.
- The fact that the buildup of Soviet military power in Asia serves many strategic and political purposes beyond those relating directly to China, and is but a portion of the Soviet global strategic buildup.
- Soviet unwillingness to make the major concessions demanded by Beijing unless China significantly reduces its relationships with the United States or moves to settle the border dispute.

At the same time, certain other forces will tend to support a reduction of the intensity of Sino-Soviet hostility. The principal such forces:

- *Overall*, the numerous changes in time, situation, and personality that have occurred since the Sino-Soviet split of a generation ago—which render extreme hostility between Moscow and Beijing somewhat of an outmoded phenomenon, the product of certain circumstances of the time that now have less relevance.

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- The mere fact of reaching agreement on at least some (secondary) issues in itself creates an environment for momentum and the possibility of further agreements.
- *On the Soviet side*, as Moscow's leaders perceive increasing strategic challenge from more forceful US policies and future US weapon systems and deployments, a strong wish on their part to lessen the possibility that Sino-Soviet hostilities might greatly complicate the USSR's basic security interests or its overall strategic objectives.
- A basic desire to reduce the danger of a two-front war.
- A strong desire to prevent close cooperation between China and the United States (and Japan), and to that end to take advantage of known dissatisfactions on the part of Beijing with its American connection.
- A desire to enhance the security of the USSR's eastern borders by means additional to military power.
- Concern about what the long-term political implications would be for China's economic modernization programs if outside assistance to those programs were to come only from the United States and the West.
- A sense in Moscow that the danger of Chinese adventurist actions against the Soviet Union—one of the original reasons for the beginnings of the Soviet military buildup, years ago, on the Sino-Soviet border—has greatly diminished.
- The opportunity to take advantage of the more businesslike attitudes and procedures that have come to mark Chinese politics and society since the death of Mao Zedong, in the process lessening some of the emotional content that Mao and Nikita Khrushchev personally contributed to Sino-Soviet estrangement.
- *On the Chinese side*, Deng Xiaoping and his associates have determined that (a) China's greatest problems are those it faces as a vast, poor LDC; (b) the process of national development in China will be so difficult that it will need a prolonged period of respite from outside pressures; (c) to these ends a reordering of China's foreign policies is needed, one that reduces the level of tension with the USSR; and (d) such a reordering would not seriously risk jeopardizing the continuance either of strong US-led opposition to Soviet expansion in the world, or of US and Western willingness to continue cooperating economically with China.

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- Associated with those decisions, almost certainly low expectations on the part of Beijing's leaders that the United States would come to Beijing's aid in the event of a Soviet attack on China.
- China's discovery during its invasion of Vietnam in 1979 that it faced a formidable military antagonist on its southern border, and Beijing's consequent desire to reduce the pressures on China resulting from its two-front confrontation with the USSR and Vietnam.
- Views on the part of China's leaders that a modest improvement of relations with the USSR serves to increase Beijing's leverage on Washington.
- A desire to diversify further the foreign sources of input into China's modernization, and to take advantage of certain benefits that would derive from expanded economic and technological ties with the USSR.
- A view on the part of Deng and his fellow pragmatists that less hostile relationships with the USSR will also signal that, in accepting some US economic and military assistance, Beijing does not intend to embrace the United States too closely or completely refuse all assistance from the USSR.

It should be stressed that present Sino-Soviet talks are taking place against the background of a continuing substantial augmentation of Soviet military strength adjacent to China—which has continued during the Sino-Soviet consultations of the past two years. Roughly one-fourth of all Soviet ground force personnel are now stationed opposite China, together with more than 2,000 Soviet aircraft, over 100,000 air personnel, greatly enhanced naval strength, a rapidly expanding SS-20 force, and considerable additional nuclear weapons carriers in the form of Backfire and Badger bombers, SLBMs, and ICBMs. The great majority of the USSR's nuclear weapons targeted against East Asia will continue to be devoted to Chinese targets. And, a principal net result of the buildup will be certain continuing marked asymmetries in Soviet and Chinese military forces: the Chinese seriously lagging, qualitatively, in modern arms; Soviet ground and air forces generally positioned fairly close to China's borders, Chinese forces deployed deeply behind those borders.

Moscow's leaders see their military augmentation as insurance against Chinese military provocations along the border, and against the prospect of a significantly enhanced Chinese nuclear threat to the USSR

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over the long term. They almost certainly also consider that their forces will continue to serve meanwhile as a deterrent to China from invading Vietnam once again, or from otherwise effectively challenging Soviet interests in Indochina. And, these forces will strengthen Moscow's negotiating hand vis-a-vis the Chinese.

This ongoing Soviet augmentation will at the same time continue to stem from many causes beyond those directly relating to China and will continue to serve many broader Soviet interests. That is, the augmentation of forces in the East also reflects the USSR's plans to upgrade all of its forces, everywhere; its desire to strengthen its capability to fight a two-front war, in Europe and Asia; the felt need to compensate for dependence on a very long, vulnerable railroad to reinforce and resupply the isolated Soviet Far East; the traditional Soviet practice of overinsuring, of massing more military strength than outside observers might think necessary; the Soviet effort to use the military buildup as an instrument for political intimidation and further expansion of influence in East Asia; and a desire to reinforce Soviet security against the perspective of much-enhanced Western military capabilities in the Pacific.

It should also be stressed that the Sino-Soviet future is not just a bilateral matter, but will develop within the dynamic of triangular relationships with the United States. This dynamic will be a crucially important factor affecting the behavior of Moscow and Beijing toward the other. Each leadership will remain highly sensitive to its perceptions of the US relationship with the rival Communist power, and especially to any development that either power might consider to represent a major discontinuity in US orientation or strategic priorities.

What developments appear most likely in the Sino-Soviet relationship over the next two years or so?

- Chances favor continuance of the process of markedly increasing trade relations and reaching agreements on other secondary issues of economic and technological ties, cultural interchanges, and the like, amidst continuing reflections of a more business-like, less intensely hostile overall atmosphere. This may proceed to the point of including agreement on certain confidence-building measures (CBMs) such as mutual notification of troop exercises.
- The two sides will upgrade the level of negotiating representation. The Soviets will continue to press for broader ties with Beijing, in the belief that agreement on enough small steps will lay a path for progress on major issues. The Soviets will also seek

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to institutionalize the negotiating process. The Chinese will probably continue to draw the line well short of the most far-reaching Soviet proposals in the absence of major Soviet military concessions.

- While continuing to emphasize its maximum demands for large-scale Soviet force reductions in the Soviet Far East, Beijing would welcome even small concessions from the Soviets in their force deployments against China. The Chinese would particularly welcome Soviet troop withdrawals from Mongolia.
- For their part, the Soviets will continue their force improvements in the East. And, the Soviets will probably not make more than token gestures to China over the next two to three years.
- Moscow will almost certainly continue to withhold *major* concessions regarding its forces along China's border and in Mongolia until Beijing has made more fundamental concessions than it has yet been willing to consider. There is nonetheless a modest chance that the Soviets will make a token pullback of perhaps a division or so from Mongolia during the next two to three years. This would not constitute a material change of much consequence, but could represent a symbolic concession of some magnitude that might induce the Chinese to reciprocate in some way—and thus perhaps encourage Moscow to make further concessions.
- Even if there were a token Soviet military pullback from Mongolia, however, we doubt that the Chinese would make major concessions on the issues of greatest concern to Moscow—particularly the border dispute—until Soviet force withdrawals had gone well beyond the token stage.
- Nor is the USSR likely to give up its control over the regime in Afghanistan, to abandon support for Vietnam's war effort in Kampuchea, or to surrender its military privileges at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam—where since late 1983 the Soviets have deployed Badger bombers.

Contingent developments that could upset the above-estimated course of Sino-Soviet relations:

- Major escalation of Vietnamese war efforts in Kampuchea or along Thailand's borders.
- North Korean reversion to incendiary policies.
- Major Soviet efforts to destabilize Pakistan.

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- Vietnamese clashes with China, either along the border or in the South China Sea.
- The adoption of major new policies on the part of post-Deng or post-Chernenko leaderships.
- A Japanese move toward major rearmament.

Possible alternative outcomes:

- There is an off chance that during the period of this Estimate the Sino-Soviet relationship could take on a much more hostile character than the Estimate holds probable:
 - This could occur because so many variables are present, many of them not fully within the control of the present leaderships in either Moscow or Beijing: the advent of new policies on the part of post-Deng or post-Chernenko leadership, initiatives taken by other governments (in Korea or Vietnam, for example), and so on.
 - It does not follow that US interests would necessarily benefit from the coming of a much more frigid Sino-Soviet relationship. The effect on US interests would depend on the nature and intensity of the estrangement between Moscow and Beijing: up to a point, US interests would clearly benefit from probable increases in Chinese cooperation against Soviet policies in the world, in Chinese receptiveness to US advice and counsel, and—possibly—in willingness to permit expanded levels of Western economic and technological presence within China. But, if Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated to the point of actual or threatened large-scale hostilities, US diplomatic and security policymaking could be greatly complicated.
- Conversely, there is also an outside chance—though less likely than the above—that the Sino-Soviet relationship could become a much closer one during the period of this Estimate than we now judge likely:
 - This might come to pass if no great disruptive contingencies should occur; if the Chinese should back away in practice—though not in principle—from certain of their key “demands”; if agreements reached on a number of secondary issues should begin to create a somewhat greater momentum toward Sino-Soviet rapprochement; or if for some reason Beijing’s leaders should come to depreciate the value of China’s relationships with the United States.

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- The coming of significantly closer relations between the USSR and China could seriously harm US interests; the warmer the Sino-Soviet relationship, the more damaging to US geopolitical concerns, defense policies, targeting, and alliance systems, to the role of Japan, and to numerous other key US interests.
- Although the possibility cannot be excluded that alternative outcomes such as the above could occur in the Sino-Soviet relationship, we stress that the most likely outcome, by far, is that which this NIE has postulated: namely, that the level of hostility between Moscow and Beijing will decrease, that some additional agreements on secondary matters or possibly CBMs will be reached, that at most the USSR may make a token withdrawal of perhaps a division or so from Mongolia, and that continuing basic differences between Moscow and Beijing will not permit any significantly greater degree of rapprochement between them to develop over the next two to three years.

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